Random Thoughts on a Boyhood Classic Limited to Grownups

With Morals for Artists, Who Are Said to Lack Them, as a Class

By HARRY ESTY DOUNCE.

IF ever good fairy offers me three wishes, my first one will be to have the gifts of a competent illustrator,-and take an illustrator's bus driver's holidays drawing pictures for my favorite novels. But when they are drawn I shall, I hope, have sense enough to hide them away from publishers. Should any Pol Pry rummaging in my studio unearth them I could explain that they were scenes from Shakespeare.

Mr. George Varian has been giving himself exactly the holiday I envy, and with *Treasure Island*. He is the son of a seafaring man, and has been one himself, and "this story of the sea and buried treasure" so enticed his salt rimed brush that "without an order he started a set of pictures." Thus far I admire Mr. Varian. But—his pictures are the excuse for a new edition of a book of which *copies* cannot be too many, but of which editions for every purse were always available. The question is whether Mr. Varian's labor of love is worth another. Suppose we waive considerations like the pressure upon a restricted supply of white paper.

Paget's Pictures.

Some novels are the incontestably filed claims of illustrator pioneers, whose drawings are associated once for all with the text. *Treasure Island* may not be one of them. But for readers who began on the Paget pictures it is hard to believe they will ever see others more sympathetic and satisfying. I never reread about Mr. Dance riding down Pew or Silver examining the duplicate chart on deck by lantern light or Jim in the crosstrees shooting Israel Hands and the latter tumbling backward from the shrouds without seeing, line for line, as Paget saw—which, I believe, in bigotry perhaps, is very much as Stevenson himself saw.

Mr. Varian has a more recent anticipator in the able N. C. Wyeth of the Pyle school. Mr. Wyeth rather jettisoned fidelity to go for the shuddersome feeling which the pirates, as monstrous hobgoblins of the dark, might inspire in a sensitive child. If the whole ship's company were Pews and all the action took place by night—and if *Treasure Island* were a juvenile; a familiar point I shall get to in a minute—there would be much to be said for the idea. Mr. Varian, more like Paget, undertakes to illustrate in the ordinary, conscientious way. (Perhaps I mean the extraordinary conscientious way, as illustrating done while you wait goes now.) Being late in the field, he finds the best subjects preempted. Bill Bones's slash at Black Dog he cannot resist, but instead of Hands's demise he gives us Jim dodging Hands around the mainmast—Jim as a rather buttery little boy, Hands (who with all his low, piglike cunning and his gunner's eye is only a sodden, honest looking dolt) as a fierce, aquiline cutthroat out of a bad dream.

Pew Finds Bill Bones.

His painting of the entrance of Pew to Bones is a fair enough example of his achievement. Here is a scene whose quality being grasped from the text by the actor who originally played Pew in the Hopkins dramatization enabled him to freeze the blood of every person in the theatre. Instead of the valuable gloom inside a dark pub. parlor toward nightfall of a foggy winter's day, Mr. Varian leaves the paper white and guileless around his figures; the sinister mystery of Pew's great cloak is lost, and each rent and patch outlined as if to guide a costumer; the "dreadful looking figure" himself, though correct as to the properties, becomes a mere ugly blind man wanting some front teeth; the blue jawed Bones is an old Italian charwoman, and Jim this time is Lord Fauntleroy in plain and lowly garb.

Some of Mr. Varian's work is in colors, some in line. He certainly cannot be charged with lack of courage, for he throws in portrait studies of the heads of six principal characters. A tempting thing to try, but what a hazardous thing to publish! It is true that only one character, Silver, is really a human exception, the rest except Pew, who is a nightmare, and Jim, who is largely a flexible device to enable R. L. S. to play with his yarn freely, being assignable to standard types. None the less, they are alive; they are complete; in Kipling's phrase they stand on their legs, and they are as well known to most of us nearly as our parents. The *looks* of each one is more or less compellingly suggested. The mind's eye has something to guide it, in Silver's case it has much. We have all made mental portraits for ourselves.

Impossible Portraits.

Because I happen to see "the neat, bright Doctor" as an incisive, rather Celtic individual, with deep set, twinkling eyes, a disciplined mouth and somewhat salient and opinionated nose and chin, I do not insist that an illustrator must model his features just so or risk my awful displeasure; I do insist that he draw a man who conceivably could be David Livesey, M. D., and not a worried elderly beau on the facial lines of movie idols. I am open minded about the Captain's physiognomy, but not about his nature; I won't have Mr. Varian's low seafaring anarchist. All I require for Jim Hawkins is at least the years of early adolescence. A chubby little cherub could not manage Jim's adventures—to say nothing of Jim's impossible felicity as a narrator! As for the Squire, I admit he is a fool, with his faculties bandaged like a Chinese woman's foot by the Tory traditions of his caste, but not (if you sense the choice distinction) that he is a fathead, which is Mr. Varian's opinion.

For Silver I am, like Stevenson, more specifically exacting. Not, however, the impossibilist all these strictures might lead you to suppose; the bland and oily Silver of Henry Dixey of the eloquent rolling eyes approximated my Silver in appearance very well. Mr. Varian has tried to draw the sea cook with his mask off, and what he has drawn is Blackbeard with a clean shave. Silver at his transitory ugliest and deadliest could hardly look like that, while that could never remotely resemble the kindly, obsequious Silver who takes in the Doctor himself until the apple barrel betrays him. Silver never is fully unmasked, but always watching the main chance shrewdly through one mask or another.

In short, these Varian pictures will not do. You have only to glance at them to see it, and to say it is all the reviewing they require. I have examined them at length, partly because I have a passion for *Treasure Island* and take pleasure in writing about it, partly because any man who shares that passion sufficiently to start a set of pictures without an order is entitled to extended consideration.

The publisher's purpose seems to have been to provide the very young idea with a low priced, clear printed edition full of pictures. But is the very young idea the public for *Treasure Island*? R. L. S. frankly thought to "fetch the kids"; it is generally conceded that he failed. As to the causes of his failure I recall no inside testimony, and venture to offer a little. The kid I remember began on the book at 10, for the excellent reason that his parents had forbidden it, lest it have him seeing things at night. He found it dull—then. These were the Spanish war days, when every rightly constituted kid had by heart the date, speed, armament and complement of every modern warship in two navies, and they were the stuff of his romance of the sea.

Also the shapes and makes of revolvers and repeating rifles, with wooden emulations of which we played Wild West or cops and robbers, never eighteenth century Captain Kidd and buried treasure. Such historic carnage as we recognized went back no further than the civil war. We were up to date, muzzle loaders and periwigs were old fashioned. One feller with a Winchester ree-peater could pick off every pirate in that charge on that stockade! It wasn't pirates we saw in the dark; it was scientific and highly lethal burglars. We could make believe about Mars on a pinch (I remember our being fascinated by uncomprehended serial instalments of *The War of the Worlds*) or about prehistoric dinosaurs, provided they were slain with Winchesters, as happened in an excellent fanciful tale by a young man named Robert Chambers. But enchanting recreation of excitements a century and a half old, and English excitements to boot (we still hated George III. and Lord North from our school books, Mr. Charles Altschul will learn with interest), were wasted on our immaturity.

Casualties and Beauty.

Besides, there was too much fair play for our taste in *Treasure Island*. The casualties go give and take. Fever helps valor win against long odds. The author of *Young Surefoot* knew more about fetching kids; in *his* works the boy hero slaughters the enemy wholesale, simply mows down multitudes of varlets with his own hand. This, now, Jim Hawkins he only kills one—and that one rather fortuitously. We had our opinions of such a poor spirited milksop. And while it is of record that young Lloyd Osbourne, the kid for whom the tale was made and on whom it was tried, stipulated there should be no women in it, I have my doubts that Master Osbourne's misogyny is the rule and not the exception at a tender age. Boyhood can throb for beauty in distress; it is stale old cynics who rejoice as a class when they pick up the rare good yarn devoid of a heroine.

I can tell you just which part of *Treasure Island* proved miles over childhood's head. It is the subtle "motivation" —nasty word!—of the private diplomacy of Long John where, with all the advantage still ostensibly the pirates', he plays to have "a foot in either camp," and dickers with Jim and the Doctor to save his neck. To save our lives we couldn't make him out. We wanted our villains consistent and elemental.

Past Possibilities.

I will own that if childhood could have this beloved book read to it with a very little very tactful expounding by the way —if every kid could first sample it under some poor approximation of the conditions under which the original kid was regaled—the effect might be different; indeed, I know of a case where a most unusual school teacher did read it aloud to her Seventh Grade and it "went big." I am satisfied, though, that real childhood is unready to read it alone.

At late 14 the boy I remember met with it again. He could probably have taken to it then, but it was thrust upon him in a high school English course, and you had to "tell in your own words" on theme paper the story of the murder of Tom, and pick out balanced sentences and metaphors and such. No hereafter can be too hot for the muttonish good intentions of "educators" who do things like that to books like *Treasure Island*. It is all right for George Eliot; I highly approve of it for *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Shakespeare suffers it everywhere, and so reviving Shakespeare loses money. Why that youth ever opened the book again I cannot say. He did, at 20 or thereabout, and has since reread it seventeen times, which is only a good beginning.

The new edition is pockmarked with proofreader's slights here and there, but so are all the other new publications of the day.

TREASURE ISLAND. Illustrated by George Varian. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Alice Meynell's Poems

By BARRETT H. CLARK.

ONE feels a sense of relief in turning to the studied passion and unrevolutionary religious ardor of Alice Meynell's poetry. Mrs. Meynell is of the line of Meredith, and her slender volume, *A Father of Women and Other Poems*, constantly recalls the less recondite verses of The Master. The relief just remarked will be felt by those readers that are surfeited with the products of the Experimentists, good and bad. Mrs. Meynell's poetry is studied, sophisticated, Victorian, conventional even.

The handful of poems comprising this volume are various in character, though the note of religious ecstasy predominates.

The poem that gives the volume its title is a stirring appeal; it is worth quoting:

"Our father works in us.
The daughters of his manhood. Not undone
Is he; not wasted, though transmuted thus,
And though he left no son.

"Therefore on him I cry
To arm me: 'For my delicate mind a casque,
A breastplate for my heart, courage to die,
Of thee, captain, I ask.

" 'Nor strengthen only; press
A finger on this violent blood and pale,
Over this rash will let thy tenderness
A while pause, and prevail.

" 'And shepherd-father, thou
Whose staff folded my thoughts before my birth,
Control them now I am of earth, and now
Thou art no more of earth.

" 'Oh liberal, constant, dear!
Crush in my nature the ungenerous art
Of the inferior; set me high, and here,
Here garner up thy heart.'

"Like to him now are they,
The million living fathers of the War—
Mourning the crippled world, the bitter day—
Whose striplings are no more.

"The crippled world! Come, then,
Fathers of women with your honor in trust;
Approve, accept, know them daughters of man,
Now that your sons are dust."

The highly wrought and chastened art of Mrs. Meynell has always prevented popular appreciation of her aristocratic workmanship, but this volume should appeal to the lovers of genuine if not altogether unhampered and inspired verse.

A FATHER OF WOMEN AND OTHER POEMS. By ALICE MEYNELL. Charles Scribner's Sons.